

Macha Caporal: bridging gaps, embodying resistance

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ABSTRACT

The following article explores the practice and performance of a group (or 'block') of *Macha Caporal* dancers. These women appropriate the costumes, movements, and name of the male character (*Macho Caporal*) in the Bolivian *Caporales* dance. Given the demarcated gender structure established in *Caporales*—represented by the *Macho Caporal* and *Cholita* (female character) couple—the appearance of the new role of the Macha Caporal in the dance has led to social questioning about the performances and identities of women who dance as *Machas Caporales*. Based on ethnographic research undertaken from a gender perspective in 2018 in the city of La Paz (Bolivia), this current article analyses how the performance of Macha Caporal dancers reveals these women's non-conformity with the discriminatory gender norms present in their wider social contexts. Through the accounts of these women and their descriptions of the circumstances in which they practice and perform the *Caporales*, we revealed the conditions in which they dance. This made visible the dynamics of inequality and violence present in the environment of the folkloric *entradas* (dance parades) in the city of La Paz. Finally, this study examined how the organisation of women into independent blocks and their style of movement could be understood as acts of resistance and political action in a setting characterised by chauvinism and inequality.

Keywords: dance, performance, gender, agency, political action, Bolivia

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SUMMARY

Introduction
 The *Macha Caporal*: a gender performance
 Dance: a body moving 'between' genders
 The folkloric *entradas*: a space for experience, action, and negotiation
 Performance as a political act: we are the *Machas Yuriña*
 Conclusions
 Bibliographical references
 Biographical note

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INTRODUCTION

It caught my attention to see a group of women rehearsing in the men's troop of the *Caporales Centralistas*. [A] period in which they were the first is a fact that was very difficult to conceive for critical eyes that considered women only [to be suitable] for certain roles in carnival dances and so, not a challenge the physical strength required to be a caporal. (Muñoz, as cited in Godinez, 2014, p. 80).

This statement summarises the clear relationship between women who dance and gender expectations in the Bolivian context. It highlights aspects that I consider essential to understand the practice of the *Machas Caporal* in the context of the urban folkloric dances of La Paz (Bolivia): strict separation of the roles and skills associated with men and women in this dance, what society expects of women, and the consequences of crossing the line between the masculine and feminine world.

A *Macha Caporal*¹ is a female character from the Bolivian Caporales dance who appropriates the costumes, name, and movements of the masculine role in the dance. From its birth in the late 1970s to the present, the Machas have been provoking diverse and contradictory reactions both in the public and private spheres. I maintain that the reason for this uproar lies in the visual and performative proposal of the Macha character who, when dancing, crosses a series of clearly established gender borders present in the Caporales dance and in the context of the city of La Paz. The shock of seeing a woman dance 'powerfully' in the male costume reveals how gender and culture intersect in this context and how they can become taught when we move our bodies in a given time and space.

In 2012, the anthropologist Susan Reed described the unequivocal relationship between dance, gender, and culture, thus: "Dance is an important means

¹ The term *Macha* or *Machas* will be used as an abbreviation hereon in.

by which cultural ideologies of gender difference are reproduced.” (p. 88). Similarly, in 1993, the anthropologist Ted Polhemus explained how, through dance, people express and materialise the division of cultural reality into two cultures: the feminine and the masculine. Indeed, for both these authors, people express what it means to be a man or a woman in a certain society or group through the practice of dance.

Since 1980, anthropological studies have turned their attention to dances as places of study to understand human thought and action. Various studies have explored how dances are a reflection of their sociocultural environments, while simultaneously impacting and being impacted by social, political, and economic aspects of the society or group within which they develop (Thomas, 1993; Foster, 1998). Therefore, as Cynthia Novack suggested, dances possess both a productive and a reproductive quality and can “simultaneously reflect and resist cultural values” (1995, as cited in Reed, 2012, p. 94).

Thus, this makes it necessary to look at dances as spaces or structures from which gender relations and roles are negotiated and challenged. Dances, historically, have not only been used to reproduce or reinforce the norms and ideas of the dominant system in which they are immersed, but also simultaneously developed as spheres of human action with the political potential for resistance and change. This dimension of dances becomes important when studying the action of women, subjects who have historically been relegated from the public sphere and who, to this day, in various parts of the world, do not live with equal rights. It is precisely in this context that dance—an activity traditionally associated with ‘femininity’—has served as a platform to make the presence and agency of women visible. As sociologist Helen Thomas pointed out, throughout history “dance has been one of the few places where women can legitimately perform in public” (1993, as cited in Reed, 2012, p. 88).

Through this present study, I considered the Macha Caporal dance as a performance that—without having explicitly been formulated by women in this way—reveals political acts. The political nature of performance, according to Anita Singh (2021), lies in its potential to become an effective means of achieving social change. In the case of the Machas, this change is linked to transformation of the roles and stereotypes associated with women based on the construction of new ways of dancing. According to Sarah Ahmed (2017, p. 3), feminism is now happening in places historically marked as non-political. In this way, dance contexts and the act of dancing publicly can be understood as unusual—apparently ‘non-political’—places and actions through which women can resist and question gender roles.

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in La Paz between June and August 2018, with an independent group of women that refer to themselves as the *Machas Yuriña*.² This group comprises six Bolivian women aged between 29 and 32 who dance in the Macha Caporal role. Based on the analysis of my observations and field interviews with these women, as well as dialogue with authors from the field of gender studies and experts in the anthropology of dance and performance studies, I explored how, by performing the Macha Caporal role and their particular way of ‘staging’ the body, women challenge and subvert norms and expectations about the appropriate behaviour of women in this context.

LA MACHA CAPORAL: A GENDER PERFORMANCE

For the purposes of this work, I will refer to the *Macha Caporal* to talk about the role or character and to *Machas* or *Machas Caporal* to talk about the range of performances in the sense of acts and forms of dancing presented by the group of women

² For reasons of confidentiality, the real names of all my collaborators have been replaced by fictitious names.

involved in this research. A fundamental aspect of the performances of these women is their appropriation of elements of the masculine role of the dance. The women who dance Macha Caporal borrow the costumes, accessories, movements, and *Macho Caporal* name. However, they also use accessories and construct their visual presentation in a similar way to the traditional feminine role in the dance, that of the *Cholita*. The syncretic nature of their characters, which assumes aspects of both the feminine and masculine roles of the dance, makes the Macha Caporal a fascinating phenomenon to study from a gender perspective.

Women who dance necessarily assumes a role and negotiate their identities on the dance floor. La Macha Caporal is a role that has had multiple interpretations because of the nature of its ‘gender betweenness.’ Since the first decade of the 21st century, many authors have interpreted the performances of these women in various ways. On the one hand, for the researcher Javiera Benavente, the Macha Caporal provides women with “an alternative to stage their own conceptions of gender” (2017, p. 70). On the other hand, the sociologist Mauricio Sánchez proposes that, through a performance that emulates the male, the Machas “authorise sexist attitudes” (2006, p. 333) because they reproduce a social order that points to masculinity as symbol of power.

Thus, according to these interpretations, the Macha Caporal dance appears as a performance that has the potential to reaffirm a system of hegemonic power by boasting its masculinity or, on the contrary, to question it by staging other forms of the dance that women can occupy. The common vein in both these interpretations is recognition of the Macha Caporal as a phenomenon linked to gender, with both their hypotheses incorporating the notion of empowerment—albeit with different nuances—of women through the performance of this character.

According to Judith Butler (2015, p. 32), the gender performativity of these women lies in the type of

representation they use, which may or may not correspond with the obligatory (socially determined) norms that require us to become one gender or another, with this fact confirming that the reproduction of gender is always a negotiation of power. Therefore, observing the dance of the Machas as gender performances implies that we must analyse how the actions of these women—from the preparation for the performance to the act of dancing—can be understood as exercises that construct their gender identity. In other words, these acts give a sense of who they are in relation to the cultural parameters of their environment that indicates the ‘correct’ way to act and perform dances as women.

Dance is, above all, relevant to the study of gender because of its closeness to the body. According to the anthropologist Judith L. Hanna (1987, p. 3), dance is a physical behaviour because it implies organisation of the body in time and space, but it is also, at the same time, a cultural and social behaviour. In this sense, dances can be understood as ways of embodying and organising (in terms of movement) the ways of living and thinking about the world of a particular social group. Dances can reflect patterns and systems of social organisation, which suggests that how we dance can also embody ideas and norms associated with gender. However, as Butler (1988, p. 521) stated, the body is also an embodiment of possibilities. Thus, within these possibilities, dance is a means of publicly moving and exposing the body in a way that is different from social expectations.

Thus, Susan L. Foster (1998) proposed dance and the choreographic act—organisation of bodies in space—as a methodology to study how gender identities are built and constituted through actions and movements. The way in which people are grouped while dancing, the staging in space, and the appropriation, deployment, and repetition of bodily skills such as strength, agility, and stamina are “embodied forms of action and mobility” (Sliwiska, 2021, p. 4) that women deploy to change the narrative of what is expected them on the dance floor.

The reordering of gender that the Machas stage from their bodies and within the different performance spaces gives their dance a political character. Hence, it is precisely through the specific ways in which they dance that their performance breaks the gender dichotomy present in dance and produces new imaginaries about femininity and the role of women in the community of Caporales in La Paz.

DANCE: A BODY MOVING 'BETWEEN' GENRES

Most authors, as well as the community of Macha dancers, attribute the origin of the Macha Caporal to the performance of Lidia Estrada in the *Entrada del Señor del Gran Poder* in 1976³. She appeared at this entrada dressed in a man's costume and dancing in the Machos dance block, a fact that would be historically recorded as the birth of the Macha Caporal within Caporales dance history.

Thus, the Macha Caporal appeared as a third character in a dance that had historically included only the Macho Caporal and Cholita as its characters. Consequently, to understand the performances of the Machas, we must also understand the gender structure framing their appearance—that of a couple: a man and a woman. The historian Fernando Cajías (as cited in Gómez, Mendiola, and Pinto, 2010) pointed out the representation of youthful sexuality as a factor that has made the Caporales dance exceedingly popular. According to Sánchez, the dance shows “good manly men and good womanly women” (2006, p. V). Indeed, the ideal—heterosexual—couple in this dance establishes a clear representation of gender, in which each character presents a series of characteristics that are socially identified as desirable and admirable in men and women.

Macho Caporal dancers wear wide trousers, a shirt with raised shoulder pads, boots, and a hat. When dancing, they emphasise their male charisma and strength. They advance taking long steps while marking the rhythm with their footsteps. When they jump, they lift both feet off the ground; when they kick, they do so with force, raising their legs extremely high. Their performance showcases mesmerising precision, joy, and confidence. In contrast, the Cholita dances with short, closed steps, emphasising the movement of her hips and hands. This move is enhanced by her short miniskirt that swings from side to side exposing her underwear. She wears a low-cut blouse and a small, puffed hat. At the entradas she is flirtatious and walks around smiling while she dances in high heels for long hours.

Although these descriptions are a generalisation of what can be observed at a folkloric entrada, the characters also reproduce a series of visual and movement elements that denote a strong representation of masculinity and femininity. As Reed (2012, p. 89) argues, “the movement lexicons of men and women often demonstrate the ideals of gender difference in action.” Thus, the men's dance projects strength, power, and seduction, while the women's dance exhibits beauty and sensuality. Indeed, the divergences between the visual proposal and movement of each character produces a feeling of asymmetry between the Macho and the Cholita. This asymmetry is confirmed by the account by Israel Solórzano (founder of a fraternity in La Paz) who believes that the Caporal occupies a position of power with the woman being inferior and defined only as complementary to the man. As he stated, “Who is the Caporal? The foreman and the boss. And the Cholita is his wife, nothing more.”

It is within this binary and polarised structure that the Machas Caporal have broken through with their determination and desire to dance differently. They occupy a new female role in dance in that, without necessarily questioning their own gender identity, they decided to take the dance of the Macho as inspiration for their own Caporal dance. Their par-

³ In La Paz, an *entrada* is an urban parade made up of fraternities and musical ensembles that perform Bolivian music and dances.

ticipation in the dance implies a break with the marked gender structure by blurring various borders between the Machos and Cholitas. First, it achieves this through a wardrobe that reflects a syncretism between ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity.’ As Claudia tells us, from the waist down—trousers and boots—the costume is masculine, while the upper part is feminine: “Now you have the corset, which was not used before, a blouse with cleavage, you fix your hair, and you put on make-up.”

Second, the break is produced through the performance of movements from the Machos repertoire, which includes kicks, jumps, and runs, among other movements traditionally associated with the male role. These types of actions and movements, which are part of the Machas repertoire, are described by women as more challenging, fun, and complicated. In this way, the performance of these women involves qualities and ways of moving that break with the ‘body schemes’ associated with women in the La Paz context. For example, the Machas cover more space when dancing, maintain a posture with their feet farther apart, and extend their limbs when moving. In general, they make greater use of force to display movements and displacements that involve the use of their whole body.

Third, they break with the standard gender structure by breaking the gender division typical of these dance groups. In Caporal fraternities, dancers are often grouped into separate blocks by gender. However, Machas break through this divide by infiltrating the men’s group to dance side by side with the men, proving that they can do the same thing as them. This aspect takes on another dimension when, starting in the first decade of the 21st century, some Machas chose to dance alone, in their own groups, and as a new dance character, a fact that gave the Macha persona both autonomy and independence.

The changes, in terms of participation, movement, and the visual proposal of the Macha Caporal, implies a displacement of the habitus towards other ways of acting and dancing the Caporales as women

and, at a general level, within the folkloric urban environment. By habitus, I understand the “history embodied” (Gutiérrez, 2005, p. 68) by these women. A history that, in many cases is marked by women’s self-perception of their own body as ‘fragile’ or ‘weaker’ compared to that of a man, as insufficient in relation to the ‘ideal’ body for the dance (Cholita), or a background marked by a personal experience of gender violence present in their living and dancing environment.

In an interview with Sánchez (2006), Lidia Estrada commented that she decided to dance for the first time as a man because she did not like the dress skirt [of the Cholita]. This is the same reason given by the Machas Yuriña, who openly expressed their refusal to dance wearing a *pollerita* (miniskirt). Thus, for these women, choosing the Macha Caporal was a decision that involved—partially—their refusal to dance as Cholitas. As Jackeline explained, she preferred to dance in the Macha role because the audience recognises them for how they dance, while as Cholitas, “They don’t even see your face, they see you below [the waist].” In the experience of women, this rejection is justified by the generalised experience of insecurity and sexual harassment both on public roads and around the entradas. Talía said that her rejection of the miniskirt had to do with the bullying she experienced when wearing a skirt at school and in public streets. However, Jessica recalled that the first time she danced as a Cholita at an entrada everyone was looking at her under her skirt, stating that “[she] felt harassed.”

The accounts of these women show that in their decision to dance as Machas, there was a conscious desire to dance comfortably and to protect themselves from situations of sexual harassment. As a result, these women claim to experience freedom when dancing as Machas. As Jackeline commented, as a Macha, “you move as you please.” Similarly, Nancy explained that what she appreciated most about being a Macha was “That they see us dance, perform a [dance] step, express ourselves, with that freedom of not thinking that a pervert is going to come and grope us.”

Another factor that motivated women to dance as Machas was a desire to dance in a non-traditional way, which implied challenging ‘the ordinary’ and what is expected of women. The Machas Yuriña express a special admiration for the masculine dance role, which is associated with movements and actions that are more ‘challenging’ or ‘out of the ordinary’ for women. This idea was reflected in Talía’s comments, for whom a Macha is “A woman who wants to show that she can be different from the others, that she can get away from the ordinary, let’s say, from the polleras, the skirts. A woman who can also show that she has strength, that she has the same value as a man.”

All these reasons led women to embody a character that, through their dance, fights against the limitations and stereotypes imposed on them in an environment marked by sexist attitudes. They challenge the feminine stereotype embodied in the Cholita and resist being valued solely for their bodies or attributes such as sensuality and beauty. In this search, they developed a hybrid performance—with elements of both characters—that can be understood as a form of agency because it expresses the embodiment of the desire (Martin, 1985, as cited in Kowal, Siegmund, and Martin, 2017) of these women to dance ‘differently’, with freedom, comfort, and safety.

THE FOLKLORIC ENTRADAS: A SPACE FOR EXPERIENCE, ACTION, AND NEGOTIATION

Understanding the performances and experiences of these women requires understanding the context in which they dance and in which they are inserted as women. Based on Richard Schechner’s definition (2013, p. 30), in which he postulates that performances only exist in actions, interactions, and relationships, I propose that the performances of the Machas can be seen not only as dance acts, but also as the set of relationships and interactions that women develop with the different actors and spaces involved in practicing the dance.

The field of action and practice of the women of the Machas Yuriña is located in a sociocultural context in which “discrimination against women, male bias, and cultural sexism still prevail in political and social institutions, in the public space, and in the family.” (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2002, p. 29). During our conversations, the two words most often used by women to define Bolivian society were sexist and conservative. By sexist attitudes, we understand a system of gender relations that exaggerates the differences between men and women based on their so-called natural qualities and that determines what behaviour is acceptable for each sex (Fisher, 1993, p. 3).

The interviews I conducted with the Machas Yuriña revealed a widespread perception of gender roles as oppressive, especially for women. Women are expected to marry, have children, and start a family. Once married or engaged, they are expected to stop dancing because a ‘woman’s main role is in the home’. These ideas were also reflected in many of these women’s personal stories. In a personal interview, Jessica mentioned that several Machas had stopped dancing because they had got pregnant. According to these women, social and family expectations about the role of women in La Paz is a determining factor in the abandonment of the dance.

They also described the jealousy of their partners as evidence of male sexism applied to their engagement in the dance. According to Jessica, once a woman has a male partner: “They expect you to change, to stop dancing and just be with them. But they [themselves] don’t intend to stop dancing [the Caporal].” Nancy told me how she was unable to dance when she was with her ex-partner because he was extremely jealous and forbade her from doing so. These testimonies not only demonstrate gender inequality in terms of participation in dance, but also gender violence crystallised in attitudes and gestures of overprotection and control towards women by their partners.

However, most of these women allowed themselves to dance in this role despite not necessarily having the approval of their families or the financial

means. Not all of the group had stable jobs, some studied and worked at the same time, and two of the women were single mothers. All of them, with a huge amount of financial effort and investment of time, organised themselves to pay their dues,⁴ rehearse, and dance. But the obstacles were not only present in their private or family spheres, but they also laid within the sphere of where they practiced the dance, in the spaces and relationships spanning the dance. The ‘stage’ of the Machas is the folkloric *entradas*, central events within the schedule of organised events that make up the corpus of folkloric festivals in Bolivia. The *entrada* is an urban parade that brings together hundreds of dancers who dance for devotion and fun according to the Catholic religious calendar.

Within the framework of this current research, I analysed *entradas* as a reflection of their socio-cultural environment. They are spaces in which gender inequalities, behaviours of sexual violence, and sexist attitudes are all present. However, at the same time, they are also spaces where multiple identities and inclinations can be negotiated. They can even become spaces of visibility and recognition for women.

The relationships and forms of interaction that women develop with various actors—dancers, organisers, founders, and spectators, among others—throughout an *entrada* are key to understanding how gender discourses infiltrate the dance field and how they influence or condition the way women engage in the dance. Given the proximity of the Macha to the Macho Caporal as well as its ‘hybrid’ nature in appropriating elements of the man’s dance, these dancers are exposed to various reactions—both positive and negative—from spectators. According to Jessica: “For the Macha, perhaps because you’re the equivalent to the men, [...] men and women, girls and boys, everybody comes, and they tell you ‘congratulations: you’re dancing well!’”

In Jessica’s example, Machas are applauded because of their ability to ‘match the man,’ an act considered an achievement. However, there are also negative experiences, as Nancy told me: “We went to dance [...] and I had to walk about four blocks to get to where they were. As I was walking, a man passed by with his wife and told her: ‘These are the ones who’re full of themselves, these are the women who want to be equal to the men.’ But using a tone of revulsion.”

In their accounts, their similarity to men is perceived as negative and is associated with the widespread stereotype of the Machas Caporal as tomboys. These terms are expressed to define a woman who behaves like a man or looks like a man in her way of dressing or body style. This perception has led to the spread of prejudices about the sexual orientation of the Machas, who are often classified as lesbians, which itself is not well received in the conservative and Catholic context of La Paz.

Another central bond in the women’s experiences was the one they developed with other dancers while performing. According to Jessica, there is considerable support from male dancers for the Machas Caporal. However, testimonials like Claudia’s also point out the level of competition present between Machas and Machos at the *entradas*: “The Machos are the ones that look at you with a side-eye. In other words, because they supposedly think we’re imitating them [...]. It must be [that they think] like, ‘oh, these girls are wanting to do what we’re doing. And look, we jump two meters, and they jump one meter’. I think there is [competition], but within the Caporales circle.”

Claudia’s comment reveals that, in addition to a sense of competition, there is also a sexist bias on the part of men towards the women who ‘try to dance like them’. Sexist attitudes also materialise in dance spaces in the form of harassment on the street. This is one of the risks most normalised by women at the *entradas*. Many of the Machas’ testimonies described their exposure to verbal and

4 To participate in a folkloric *entrada*, each dancer must pay a fee known as the band fee.

physical harassment from men during their route in an *entrada* performance. During Chijini's *entrada*, I recorded the following experience in my field notes: "We continue, there are more and more people, and the path becomes narrower. The number of drunk people increases, and they become more disrespectful. They cross your path, they brush against you, they look at you, they say things to you."

This risk is also latent at the end of the *entrada*, when the women face the dilemma of how to safely return to their homes. As Jessica recounted: "You know, we are places far [from home], better to be with someone you know [...]. I always try to look for old friends [...] who will take care of us in the sense that we can't leave [the *entrada*] alone, so we can accompany each other to a certain place and then leave."

However, these experiences are not exclusive to the Machas Caporal. They respond to the more general situation of women in the areas surrounding *entradas* and folk festivals where, with the justification of alcohol consumption and the crowds, violence against women goes unnoticed. In fact, alcohol consumption represents another key element to explore the inequalities between men and women in the context of the folkloric *entradas*. Alcohol is a crucial factor for the creation and maintenance of social ties at the *entradas*. Although some of the women insist that drinking is not required at the *entrada*, the coexistence of alcohol consumption still has an almost mandatory quality (Cowan, 1990, as cited in Lazar, 2008).

From my observations at *entradas*, I found that women tended to occupy the role of receiving alcohol rather than buying and offering it. Such invitations could come from male or female spectators in recognition of their performances; however, they also came from fellow dancers, organisers, and the founders of groups or fraternities. These interactions placed a kind of obligation onto the act of drinking because they formed part of the transaction ritual that would lead to invitations to future events. In

this respect, Talía recounted the following: "Now, sometimes, when they see you dance, as I say, they come from other fraternities, [or are] *ex-pasantes*,⁵ and they tell you [...]: 'I am the founder of this or that fraternity, and I invite you [involving the invitation of alcohol] to join us'. Meaning that in a year or at the next *entrada*, you look for them and dance with them."

The women agree to drink alcohol at the *entradas* as part of the celebration, but also as a negotiation strategy to get invitations. A sign of women's agency in this negotiation is the development of certain strategies to control their alcohol consumption. At an event in La Paz, Jessica shared some of her secrets with me: "You drink a little and throw the rest on the ground. Under the table or a chair, so that no one notices." The other strategy consisted of being the one in charge of pouring the alcohol; then one can have control over the amount that is poured and serve others instead of drinking themselves.

Regarding the consumption of alcohol at the *entradas*, women seemed to have the same right to drink as men. However, in practice, there are external factors that condition them. As Sian Lazar (2008, p. 148) states, in Bolivia, drinking and getting drunk is the exclusive choice of men and women, although women are expected to be more self-controlled than men. The women of the Machas Yuriña enjoyed drinking alcohol in the company of their peers, but they could not drink excessively because this could have put them in a situation of vulnerability and danger within a festive environment. However, on many occasions, receiving alcohol becomes a necessary practice to fit in with the community and to survive as an independent female group.

The women's experiences revealed that the *entradas* were spaces in which ideas and hegemonic

⁵ The *pasante* is the person who takes charge of the fraternity during the management of a folk festival. They may cover expenses such as the costumes or payment of the group's band entrance fee, among other tasks.

behaviours related to gender were inscribed. These ideas become effective through the actions and interactions of the Machas with other actors who, in turn, have the power to recognise or reject their performances. In each performance, the women must negotiate with feelings such as fear, their sense of safety, and the desire for recognition to earn a place in the Caporales community. In this task, they highlight their agency to develop self-care strategies and ensure their participation in the dance. As pointed out by Randy Martin, the body as a subject in a social environment both responds to and is a transformative element of that environment (1985, as cited in Kowal et al., 2017). In this sense, women not only resist the unequal conditions of participation present at *entradas*, but also transform them through a series of attitudes and specific modes of action that we will explore below.

PERFORMANCE AS A POLITICAL ACT: WE ARE THE *MACHAS YURIÑA*

Thinking about dance as a political action implies considering the questions made legible by dance (Kowal et al., 2017), questions about political issues such as expression and display of the female body in public spaces. The performances of the Machas Yuriña are incarnations of other ways of being and acting—as women with the capacity to question prevailing social norms around gender. Women achieve this based on the complex relationships they build with power systems while practicing and performing (Taylor, 2016, p. 6). As previously explored, the Machas face a series of obstacles (economic and family, etc.)—inside and outside the *entradas*—and social expectations that permeate and limit their participation in the Caporal. When they dance, they seek to resist and overcome the conditions that restrict their dancing while also challenging dominant attitudes and beliefs about the roles and ‘appropriate’ behaviour of women in their environment.

Within my research, I was able to identify three key aspects of the performances of the Machas Yuriña that

can be understood as forms of resistance and political action: their mode of independent association, their participation as ‘figures’, and their style of movement. These three elements, which were characteristic of this group of women, are not free of complexities or contradictions; however, they are modes of action that reflect decisions about where, how, and with whom to dance, and show the determination and agency of these women.

In the field of urban folkloric dances, there are two possible means of association. The first—the most traditional—is to belong to a fraternity. Fraternities are associations of people who gather around religious worship and the practice of dances in honour of a particular religious virgin or saint. According to the anthropologist Laura Fléty (2015, p. 72), these associations are organised based on a vertical hierarchy with a formal distribution of roles and statutes and may comprise a steering committee and dancers.

To enter a fraternity, a dancer must go through an admissions process and make an annual financial contribution. In turn, all dancers must pay a fee for the accompaniment of the musical band each time they participate in an *entrada*, as well as invest in their clothing and transportation, aspects that mean that their participation in the dance may be limited by their purchasing power.

Through the experiences of the women, it is evident how the socioeconomic level, family situation, and even body image are factors that condition their admission to a fraternity. Indeed, some fraternities impose discriminatory admission criteria upon Machas, such as requiring them to be 1.70 metres tall and have a thin build. Jessica also explained that some fraternities now choose their members based on their ability to contribute financially. This fact was reinforced by Claudia’s account: “Make your costume and dance in Oruro [the Bolivian city], nothing more [...], [costs] 6,000 bolivianos⁶ for ENAF and fraternities like

⁶ The Bolivian currency.

that.”⁷ When faced with factors like these that limit the participation of women in fraternities, the need to look for other spaces to dance appeared.

Thus, the independent groups are an alternative association popular among dancers for their accessibility and inclusiveness. As an independent group of women, Machas Yuriña allows greater flexibility in terms of the participation and commitment of the dancers. The group does not have strict admission requirements and does not ask for financial contributions, except for the cost of the costume, whose cost and design are discussed among the members. The group’s organisation—a founder/director and the dancers—and its small number of members allow for greater closeness and transparency in terms of communication, as well as greater decision-making power for women about where to dance and the costs they will cover.

However, dancing in an independent group also has its drawbacks. Unlike a fraternity, an independent block does not typically belong to a departmental or district association, which means that the group will not have access to participate in *entradas* of their own. As a consequence, they must be invited by a fraternity or negotiate an invitation each time they want to participate in an *entrada*. Either option involves a fee, which puts women at a disadvantage by having to negotiate a price and position (within the ranks of the fraternity) for each *entrada*. This disadvantage, which affects all independent groups, is accentuated in the case of women’s blocks because negotiations sometimes take place in informal spaces and are established with male authorities or leaders. In my field notes I recorded Jessica’s account of a negotiation process as follows:

She told me how the founder of a prestigious fraternity once made a date with her in a bar. There would be two men there and she was going to be alone. So, she got scared and called Talía.

But both of them continued to be suspicious and they called Guillermo [Talía’s partner] to help them negotiate. Why do women feel defenceless in the act of negotiation? Why would someone meet them in a bar, with the presence of alcohol, to negotiate? It is clear that women have a lot to lose in these negotiations.

Anecdotes like these highlight the asymmetry of power present in key spaces and relationships when negotiating the participation of women in this dance. However, they also demonstrate the different mechanisms women use to deal with such situations of inequality and insecurity.

A complementary aspect to the way the women associate is their participation in the dance as ‘figures’. The figures are a way of grouping within the block that is characterised by using a small number of dancers (from 3 to 7) and by their specific placement in a line or row. Jessica explained that the benefit of dancing in figures was that this form of grouping allows for more complex choreography and more difficult steps.

During the course of the *entradas*, figures can cover more space with their movements and can play with the spatial directions, generating crossings and shapes that attract the attention of the spectators. Visibility is the aspect that the women most appreciated about dancing as figures. As Nancy expressed: “The special thing for me is that they know us better and when we pass by they applaud us, they know who we are and, in many cases, they even recognise us by name and congratulate us.” While, as Talía recounted, in a large block they would go unnoticed because: “There are several rows and sometimes they put you in the middle or at the back, where they don’t see you much.”

In the testimonies of Machas Yuriña, the power of applause and congratulations from the public seemed to have a huge effect on the women and their perceptions of positive feelings associated with the dance. For Nancy, it boosted her self-esteem, while for Claudia, it was the moment she looked forward to the most when dancing. For Talía it was proof that she did a good job, and for Jackeline, it was a joy. The satisfac-

⁷ Referring to the most prestigious or long-standing fraternity in Bolivia.

tion generated by public recognition was such that it seemed to minimise feelings about difficulties and extra efforts related to their dancing.

The third key aspect of the performance of the Machas Yuriña was their intermediate dance style. Jessica says that there are three styles in the Caporales dance: the strong, the intermediate, and the soft. The ideal style for her is intermediate, since it involves a balance between the strength of the Macho and softness of the Cholita. For the purposes of this study, the aspect that I was interested in emphasising about the style of their movements was its link with notions of gender and ideas about the masculine and feminine. Women's aesthetic perceptions of movement reflect how the normalised ideas of how they should look or move as women infiltrate their performances. As Jill Dolan (1985, p. 10) pointed out, socially constructed gender roles are inscribed in our language and in our bodies. Nonetheless, these women bet on incorporating more elaborate steps into their performances, such as changing levels, kicking, and jumping. 'Stronger' movements that are not common in the repertoire of women their age or in the female dances of the entradas and that, therefore, contradict the social expectations of their environment. As Nancy related, "The first time we did step 6, I was blown away because it was the *first time* [my emphasis] that we had jumped and kicked."

Testimonies like this show that women, in their performances as Machas, still manage to make movements that surprise them. In this sense, the Machas Caporal develop a feeling of achievement by executing movements or sequences they thought they were incapable of performing because of their 'inhibited intentionality', one of the modalities of female oppression developed by the philosopher Iris M. Young. According to Young (1980, p. 146), the female body does not use its real capacity, referring both to the potential of its physical size and strength, or the real abilities and coordination available to it. Thus, the Machas, through their performance of masculine steps, overcome the prejudice about what they had culturally learned about what women cannot do,

which suggests that this role could contribute to a type of empowerment in these women.

It is important to highlight that the appropriation of qualities such as strength and a greater use of space—characteristics of masculine performances inside and outside of dance—does not rob them of their ability to also be feminine. Women understand feminine characteristics as being flirtatious and elegant, and adorning themselves with accessories and makeup: ideas of 'femininity' that partly respond to the canons of beauty present in their environment. The performance by Machas Yuriña is a combination of attitudes, behaviours, and ways of moving and organising that demonstrate the balance between these characteristics.

Through each performance in the entradas, the dancers build their identities "using various strategies, both of reproduction and subversion" (Guaygua, 2003, p. 172). The performance of Las Machas presents a delicate balance between the concepts of reproduction and subversion. Their subversion lies in the act of appropriation of masculine costumes and steps, as well as their public display. They simultaneously reproduce the wardrobe of the Cholita in the neckline and design of their blouses, dancing both with elegance and coquetry. The true strength of the Machas Yuriña lies here, in their way of 'staging' the appropriation of the masculine without underestimating the power that exists in their femininity.

They have chosen to dance not only in the largest and most prestigious entradas, but also in the zonal entradas located in more remote and even more dangerous areas. Throughout the course of each entrada, they demonstrate their agency to simultaneously solve obstacles and dance with grace. Regardless of the weather or time of day, they advance determinedly, demonstrating their beauty and agility to dance. They look at the public confidently, smile, and take photos with the spectators. While they dance, they receive and drink the glasses of alcohol the public offers them in recognition of their performance. They dance for hours, going up and down in level, on paved or unpaved tracks, passing through lonely streets and large avenues, and dodging

cars and drunken people, in so showing their ability to endure. In the process, they negotiate payments and new invites for future events. They drink, but they control the amount of alcohol they consume; they enjoy themselves without neglecting how they will get home. Their performance is a balance between enjoyment, alertness, resilience, and self-care.

The experience and performance of Machas Yuriña gives an account of the processes women go through to negotiate and overcome the limitations and inequalities present in the field of dance. As Ida Meftahi (2016, p. 1) affirmed, all dance is conditioned by multiple social, cultural, political, economic, and ideological factors. The conditions and limitations that complicate the participation of Machas Yuriña legitimise the sexist culture present in the folkloric entradas. Faced with this, as discussed in this work, women deploy various modes of resistance and action that can be understood as a way of engaging in politics through dance.

Indeed, through their dance, these women are transforming deep beliefs they have about themselves as women. Dancing on their own terms—as Machas—implies believing in their strength and transcending the stereotype that women are only good for dancing ‘prettily’ or ‘softly’. Through their performances, they send a powerful message about how and why they want to be recognised as women in the public sphere, turning their dance into an “alternative space of struggle” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 152) against the sexist attitudes and gender inequalities present in their environment.

CONCLUSIONS

The specific case of Machas Yuriña demonstrates how dance, as an organised and intentional movement, can embody and communicate the agency and tenacity of women to achieve notoriety in their participation in the Caporales community. Following the thought of Ahmed (2017, p. 4), who postulated that feminist acts have to do with who does what and where, the performances of these women—who

appropriate force and dance independently in an environment where gender roles and expectations are oppressive and stifling—can be understood as revolutionary acts.

This present article described the different factors that complicate the participation of Machas in the folkloric entradas. Some of these factors are also common to other dancers while others are presented as restrictions related to gender and the way women dance. Throughout this work I have shown that money, time, and a lack of support from families are obstacles to engagement in this dance. It was also shown that the risk of sexual harassment threatens the safety and experiences of women during the entradas.

However, this panorama was not intended to show women as passive agents in an unequal and sexist context. On the contrary, it seeks to highlight the different mechanisms, decisions, and actions that women use within their independent groups. Their mode of association, role as figures, style of movement, and their performance throughout entradas are evidence of their agency to conquer a practice that allows them to dance with freedom, pleasure, and visibility in a competitive environment.

The commitment and passion of women to the dance in the La Paz context speaks of a very deep desire for recognition. Indeed, Butler highlighted how “the Hegelian tradition links desire with recognition: it affirms that desire is always a desire for recognition and that any of us may constitute ourselves as a viable social being solely through the experience of recognition” (2006, p. 14). Dancing as a Macha Caporal seems to generate, above all, the visibility and recognition that women crave, perhaps because it is a way of validating themselves in an environment that makes them invisible.

It is key to reiterate that this benefit is accessible to them through a singular type of performance. Not the simple emulation of men, but the construction of a role that appropriates ‘masculinity’—understood as

strength and defiance—while incorporating ‘femininity’—understood as beauty and elegance. It is in the syncretism of these visual elements and movement qualities that women subvert gender expectations and turn their aesthetic proposal into political action. It is from their particular choice of movements, postures, appearances, and behaviours (Meftahi, 2016, p. 4) as dancers in the folkloric entradas that the Machas shake up the sensibilities of the spectators, and as Singh (2021, p. 24) suggests, raise provocative questions that might help us think about gender roles and stereotypes in a different way.

The Bolivia Gender Human Development Report states the need to ask about “the ideas and quality of women’s own practices, from which the processes [...] of change are triggered” (UNDP, 2002, p. 30). The phenomenon of the Caporal Machas can be understood as a practice that reflects a change in the mentality of women in pursuit of the development of their full potential and access to equal rights. That demonstrates, as stated by the dancer and researcher Ann Cooper Albright (2013, p. 5), that there is a connection between how we think about the world and how we move within it.

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